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Profile interview: Keeping emotions intact in war reporting: Shahanaaz Habib

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Profile Interview:

Keeping Emotions Intact in War Reporting:



Shahanaaz Habib

News Editor, *The Star*, Malaysia.

Author, *Between Blood & Bombs*, Times Publishing, Malaysia 2005.

Eric Loo: You're the first Malaysian journalist sent to cover war in a foreign country. What led to your assignment to cover the war in Iraq in April 2003?

Shahanaaz Habib: I think there was another journalist in the 1970s who covered the Vietnam war. And a colleague of mine had covered the Bosnian conflict, which of course, was years before the 2003 war in Iraq. So there have been other Malaysian journalists who covered wars in foreign countries. As to what led me to cover the war in Iraq – my boss came up to me one day in late Feb 2003 and said the newspaper was thinking of sending me along with a senior editor to Iraq to cover the war and asked if I was prepared to go. Of course I said “yes”. No hesitation. (The senior editor did not get into Iraq in the end. We decided to split up in Jordan because we figured that way at least one of us would have a better chance of getting in. He tried the Turkey route and couldn't get in. I went in by land through Jordan.)

What preparations and training did you go through before leaving for Iraq?

None, partly because we don't report on war much and so we do not have specialised training and preparation for that. All I did was read up on Iraq, Saddam etc and made contacts with Iraqis living in Malaysia to tap their thinking. I had to figure out how I was going to get into Iraq – through Jordan, Syria, Kuwait, Saudi, Turkey or Iran. I checked with humanitarian and aid organisations and found that Jordan and Syria were probably the best bet. It was only a year after the Iraq experience that I finally went for proper training. I attended the *Hostile Environment Training* (Hefat) conducted by *Centurion*, a group of ex-military people in the UK on preparing oneself in situations of war, conflict, disaster, hostage taking and first aid. I had asked to go for this training in 2004 and after my Iraq experience, *The Star* readily agreed to it. It was a good training programme, but frightfully expensive. I wish

that other Malaysian journalists could attend this training programme. I am the only local journalist who had gone for the *Hefat* course so far. This is sad because since the Daniel Pearl murder, the course has become a mandatory requirement for international journalists from the bigger organisations like *AP*, *Reuters*, *AFP*, *Sky News* – before they are allowed to cover conflict and war. Unfortunately finances do not allow most Malaysian journalists to benefit from such training.

With no military experience, language skills, or experience living with the Iraqi people, what help did you have in gathering information, meeting the locals, taking the photos and writing the stories?

People were generally helpful. One of the guides was a French photographer I met in Baghdad was really helpful with info. I needed a driver to move around, and an interpreter to get past the language problem. There were academics I met on my rounds who spoke English and whom I made friends with and who gave me info. Iraqis – whether they welcomed or opposed the war – seemed to have a good opinion of Malaysia, Malaysians and the then Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad. This too helped.

How did you piece together your stories in situations that were confusing, complex, and often risky?

Basically, I wrote stories about the people and how their lives were affected by the war. What they saw, how they felt. I tried hard to get both sides of the stories. I did not duplicate what the wire stories were focusing on – which were stories like who was winning the war, the location of the US troops as they advanced into Baghdad. I was working on my own. I didn't even have a satellite phone or satellite modem to send stories and had to rely on other reporters to help me out. So I went for alternative stories – people stories, the untold stories, the faces behind the war.

How did you decide what stories to write? How did you deal with the daily pressure of filing your eyewitness stories?

I just moved around and wrote what I thought I would have liked to read and know -- and hoped that people would like to read and know about that too. The pressure was tough because I had no satellite modem or satellite phone so I didn't have the technological means to file stories. Which meant that I had to run around after a story asking other reporters who were not using their satellite modems to help send my story. I was able to cast aside the other pressures – the psychological pressures of what I was seeing – because I was just so busy getting the story, dealing with the driver, interpreter, getting enough food and water -- most importantly finding a way to file stories back to the newspaper.

How did you file your stories back to *The Star*, and how often?

I asked other reporters to help through their satellite modem. And I managed to send a story or two everyday during the March/April war. For text stories, the file is small so foreign reporters were ok about helping send my stories. I didn't get to send photos through because the files were larger and thus would cost a lot more -- and I didn't have a digital camera with me. I only had an analog camera, which was inconvenient in terms of sending off photos through the satellite system. When I was asked to go back into Iraq in Nov 2003, I asked the *Star* to buy a satellite phone

and satellite modem. The newspaper got our first satellite equipment in Nov 2003 – which was useful in Dec the same year when we covered the earthquake in Bam, Iran. Since then we have bought more satellite phones and satellite modems. In my second trip to Iraq (Nov 2003), I had already got myself a digital camera. I bought it in May 2003 – it was probably one of the first things I bought once I got back to Malaysia after covering the war on Iraq.

How did you decide which narrative style to take for which stories? Or do you follow a set plan for highlighting different aspects of the war?

I didn't follow a set plan. After all it's a war. You can't have a set plan because things are volatile and unexpected. But I tried to go for a variety of stories. That's natural in the profession because you don't want to be telling the same story over and over again. I was always looking for something new, that meant highlighting different aspects of the war. After Baghdad fell, I finally could get access to the American soldiers and spoke to them to get their side of what they saw and how they felt. (I wasn't embedded. Thus, prior to April 9, I did not have access to the US troops and their allies). It is a normal part of journalism to speak to all sides. The Kurds, the Shiites, the Sunnis, the Christians, the Americans, the human shields, the doctors, academics, zoo keeper - whoever would talk - you talk to them.

What did you hope to convey to your readers back home each time you wrote your stories?

I didn't have any preconception. I just wanted to be their eyes, ears and nose, and write what I was seeing, hearing, feeling and smelling so that the readers could experience this with me.

Does knowing that your stories will also be placed on *The Star Online* influence your story angles and its contents?

I had no clue if the *Star* would use my stories at all. I had no phone -- so no email and no contact with the newspaper. The telecommunication system was knocked out by bombs, so the only way to communicate was through a satellite phone, and satellite modem. I managed to call only once or twice using someone else's satellite phone. And those calls were very brief and confined to 'did you receive my stories today?' 'Is the story garbled or okay?' I couldn't chat or exchange info because it was on borrowed satellite phones, and satellite calls are pricey. I had no idea if my newspaper would use the stories at all or if they wanted me to come back. But I kept on writing because I believed I was doing my job as a reporter.

The phrase "collateral damage" is often used by the American media as a euphemism for civilians – many of them children and women - killed in the crossfire. This somehow gives the war a more benign feel. What's your advice to journalists covering the reality of civilians killed in the war?

That war is painful and ugly. As reporters, we have to try to be detached from being caught in the whirlwind of emotions, and focus on telling the story. Reporters have to protect themselves psychologically and be able to function by focusing on telling the story objectively, without taking sides. Because for every thing there are two sides. It's important to show both. And to do the job, one has to "suspend judgement".

There's a perception that some journalists covering the Iraqi war are 'hotel room warriors' who don't spent much time on the battlefield. Is this a fair observation?

I went into Iraq twice, and it was not as dangerous as the present day. In 2003, although dangerous, reporters were still going out to report and get stories. There were not so many of those "hotel room warriors" you speak of. By Nov 2003, many reporters especially Western journalists had started using armed escorts whenever they went out - some travelled in armoured cars – but they were still going out! Although many stayed away from Fallujah, but they were still going out. The situation has changed since the last time I was there. It has become far more dangerous and dark.

In war reporting, it's said that the first casualty is often the truth. With your experience in Iraq, is this a fair observation?

I suppose that's true because there is a lot of confusion as well as different people in power (eg the US president, the Iraqi president) trying to spin the story the way they want. So they feed the media with information, which is not true and, yes, in such a situation – with little time – it is very difficult to tell what is truth and what is spin or psychological warfare.

After seeing what you have seen in the frontline, how has it changed the way you see the war in Iraq today?

I was not surprised at all that three years later Iraq's turned out to be such a mess with no sight of resolution and that there were no weapons of mass destruction there in the first place. I'm not sure if I could have seen that coming if I had not gone in three years ago -- but I might have. The difference is perhaps I "feel more" for the people of Iraq and think of whether the families I got to know and the people I met are still okay, if they are alive and well, or frightened and angry. These are real people I met and got to know so it's people I know who are living through the war every single day.

You mentioned in a review of your book *Between Blood & Bombs* that as a reporter you had to remain detached 'to get the story and not to feel' (from AllMalaysia.info, Oct.18, 2004). How did you keep your emotions and the trauma of seeing the ravages of war from being transferred to your narrative?

It comes with experience and with the belief that it is important not to let emotions get in the way of the story. But there were moments that I broke down - I wrote about it in the book – when I felt that I had become so cold and I felt horrified that I had become so inhuman and dispassionate about telling the story; and another time when I left Iraq and had a nightmare of a bomb exploding near my feet. During the course of writing, you shove emotions, feelings aside to get on with the job. But sometimes – especially after the whole reporting is over – things and incidents catch up with you later.

How was your background as a Muslim helpful in your reporting? Or it makes no difference?

I suppose it helped because Muslims, both Sunnis and Shiites alike, were always happy to see another Muslim and were very friendly and warm. And they were willing to give up their bed, room and food if I was in need.

Being a female Muslim journalist on the battlefield, did you feel your sources see you differently?

They were very respectful. Iraq is a modern and progressive country with women doctors, intellectuals, scientists, politicians and so they did not think it was really all that odd. They didn't see me as a threat. They trusted me and extended their homes and gave me addresses of their families to interview and stay with. The Shiites in the south who were a little more conservative were curious and would ask questions. But they were respectful and very friendly. I don't know if it would be different for the men because generally the Iraqis are friendly.

Did you mingle much with journalists from the local Iraqi or foreign media? If you did, how helpful were these interactions with other journalists to your stories?

With foreign journalists, yes, but not with Iraqi journalists. There were many "people" from the Iraqi intelligence keeping on eye on us foreigners. So I stayed away from Iraqi journalists because I didn't want them feeding back whatever I was saying to the Iraqi information ministry and I didn't want to draw attention or get them into trouble. Foreign journalists helped because we exchanged stories and what we saw and learnt.

What prompted you to write the book *Between Blood and Bombs*?

The senior editor P. K. Katharason whom I was to go to Iraq with (the one who used the Turkey route and didn't get in) asked me to and convinced me that I should do it. So I did. I was also prompted by the fact that not many Malaysian journalists write books and hoped that this would change. And that bosses would give time off to journalists to write books.

For those who have no military training, no language skills, and no experience in covering global conflict, what's your advice if they are to be assigned to Iraq?

Use your common sense, logic, and instinct and be on the look out. Be also physically and mentally fit. Mental strength is very important.